DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 341 505 PS 020 300

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TITLE Parents as Discerning Consumers at Three Types of Early Childhood Centres.
PUB DATE Dec 91
NOTE 18p.; For related documents, see PS 020 301-302 and PS 020 307. Doctoral Research Paper, University of Otago. Paper presented at the NZARE National Conference--Knox College (13th, Dunedin, New Zealand, November 28-December 1, 1991).
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Reports - Research/Technical (143) -- Dissertations/Theses - Undetermined (040)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Day Care Centers; *Educational Quality; Foreign Countries; *Kindergarten; Needs Assessment; *Parent Attitudes; Parent Participation; Preschool Education; Program Evaluation; *School Choice
IDENTIFIERS *Day Care Selection; New Zealand; Play Centers

ABSTRACT

Parents' views on the goals of early childhood programs and on characteristics of a high quality center were examined in a study that also investigated parents' understandings of quality in three different types of early childhood services. The study was part of a major project on the quality of early childhood centers, which was funded by the New Zealand Ministry of Education. The focus in this paper is on findings revealed when day care center managers and staff were, for the first time, required by the government, as part of the charter development process, to consult with parents and find out their views. A total of 211 families participated in the survey, with the response rate high in play centers, and modest at child care centers and kindergartens. Three main topics were surveyed: (1) parents' reasons for choosing their current early childhood center; (2) parents' ratings of a list of goals and criteria of high quality centers; and (3) demographic and background information. It was found that convenience and program appearance were important factors in center selection. The most frequently cited goals were children's self-confidence, a safe and secure setting, and warm and loving care. The most important criteria for a high quality center were responsive and knowledgeable staff, good supervision, and safe and clean equipment and facilities. Differences among parents of children at play centers, child care centers, and kindergartens were found. Contains 23 references. (LB)

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Paper presented to the NZARE 13th National Conference, Knox College, Dunedin, 28 Nov - 1 Dec 1991

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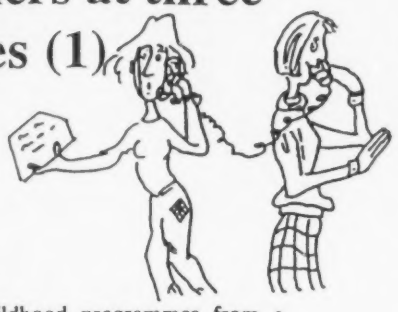
Parents' as discerning consumers at three types of early childhood centres (1)



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While there is a plethora of research about good-quality early childhood programmes from a developmental psychology perspective of what is best for children, there is relatively little that focuses on the parents' perspective. This study examines parents' needs and views on the goals of early childhood programmes and the characteristics of a good-quality centre. It also looks at parents' understandings of quality in three different types of early childhood services.

> *Study of the perspectives of people with involvement and interest in early education and care is theoretically necessary because the predominant approach in the past has been from the "science" of child development (Caldwell, 1984), and this has come under increasing attack for its limited value (Holloway, 1991; Powell, 1982). The child development perspective takes for granted that middle-class Western standards of development are universal (Silin, 1987). In contrast, Lamb and Sternberg (in press) argued that it is impossible to write a recipe for high quality care that is universally applicable because "high quality care needs to be defined with respect to the characteristics and needs of children and families in specific societies and subcultures". A particular feature or features of an early childhood programme and environment becomes desirable or undesirable only in relation to the social or cultural context in which the programme operates.*

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The benefits of quality early education and care extend well beyond the child. Factors such as the stability of a child care arrangement are a significant predictor of parents' performance in the paid work-force (Galinsky, 1986). Centres that provide affordable worry-free quality care for children reduce parents' stress from juggling childrearing, household, and employment responsibilities (Galinsky, 1988; Shinn, Oritiz-Torres, Morris, Simko, & Wong, 1989). Parents who use a childcare service are reported to feel a reduction in family problems because it brings 'stability' into the lives of children, leads to better parent-child relationships, improves the mothers' self concept and seems to result in more involvement by fathers in parenting tasks (Swain and Swain,1982). Access to a Mobile Preschool Unit service personally benefits parents who live in rural areas, for example it provides an opportunity for parents to meet (Kennedy, Ratcliff & Henry, 1990).

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(1) This is a paper on some of the findings from a major project on "The Quality of Early Childhood Centres" funded by the Ministry of Education. The research was supervised by Associate Professor Anne Smith and Dr. Terry Crooks and carried out as part of the author's doctoral studies at the University of Otago. Barrie O'Connor (Queensland University of Technology) provided helpful comment on the draft manuscript (many thanks Barrie).

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New Zealand has typically prided itself on its commitment to providing early childhood services for families and on the diversity of its early childhood services. There is now a very high rate of participation: 96 percent of the total estimated population of four to five year old children, 70.7 percent of three to four year olds, and 36.3 percent of two to three year olds (Ministry of Education, 1991). The largest services are kindergarten, childcare, and playcentre. Each has emerged at different times, for different reasons, and serves different community and parent needs (Cook, 1985; Meade, 1988).

The demand seems to be meeting supply in most places and locations for over-two-year-old children but a national shortage of infant/toddler care is still apparent. Whether supply matches parents' expectations for quality and their ability to pay for the quality they want, however, is open to question. The issues of availability and affordability are intricately linked with the issue of quality (Coombe, 1991). The early childhood service becomes more flexible to cater for different family needs and values when parents are able to exercise choice (Clifford, Wenger, Lubeck, Gallagher & Harms, 1987; Fuqua & Labensohn, 1986).

A Department of Statistics (1990) analysis of attendances at early childhood centres indicated that playcentres have experienced a drop-off in the number of enrolments over recent years. It also shows that there has been increasing demand for childcare places and although kindergarten has remained the most popular service it, too, is facing increasing competition. Playcentres operate as a parent cooperative and provide sessional care. Kindergartens also operate on a part-time sessional basis. The adult-child ratio is low in kindergartens and because of this many kindergartens are now requiring parent assistance to meet licensing standards. Childcare centres usually do not require parent input although some do request it (e.g. community childcare centres), and most are open on a full-day, five days a week basis.

Practices of working with parents and of encouraging parent involvement are based on past images of the two parent household where the mother has greater ability to be involved in her child's education because the father is the breadwinner and she is not employed (Powell, 1989). In relation to parents of school-aged children Heath and McLaughlin (1987, p. 578) suggested that both dual-career and single parent families "have precious little time or energy to spend working as partners in their children's education, visiting their school, attending conferences, or providing extracurricular activities". In examining childcare practices in the context of New Zealand social-economic changes Smith and Swain (1988) make the same claim:

> *"Most childcare centre staff believe that parents are very important for the operation of centres. Yet paid employment makes considerable demands on parents. Community (i.e. non-profit) childcare centres and family daycare schemes are generally characterised by the hope and/or expectation of parent involvement ... Parental employment conditions in association with family structure (e.g. dual versus single parent families) are a major influence on the way that parents can be involved with childcare" (p. 20).*

Early educators have always recognized the significant influence of the family on children's development (Powell, 1989). The nature of relations between centre staff and parents are usually described by the terms of partnership, parent involvement, and parent-staff collaboration. Powell suggests that a new image of the parents' role in relation to the early childhood service is emerging: parents as "consumers or customers".

> *New Zealand research provides some insight into parents' views of early education and care. Swain and Swain's (1982) study of parents' views at a Hamilton childcare centre showed that parents are most interested in the social-emotional dimensions of quality. All parents rated two criteria as very important. The first was that staff need to show warmth, affection and a genuine concern for children. The second was that the centre should be a warm and comfortable place for children. Parents' viewed quality in terms of a "warm and spacious centre providing a rich and stimulating blend of activities, especially those facilitating social skills, through a staff of warm, caring adults willing and able to give each child individual attention" (p. 33).*

In Podmore and Craig's (1991) study, interviews with parents of 36 infants and toddlers attending six Auckland and Wellington childcare centres revealed that children's emotional needs were seen as a priority area for the early childhood programme. A high percentage of parents (86%) wanted to feel assured that their infants or toddlers were safe, secure, and well cared for. Over half the parents stated a need to know that their children's intellectual needs were recognized. Some parents (31%) expressed the view that infants and toddlers have no cultural needs, while other parents mentioned various ways that the early childhood programme should meet children's cultural needs (e.g. 25 percent mentioned Maori or Pacific Island cultures as important for children to learn about).

Previous research has indicated some aspects of the consumer perspective, however, researchers have mainly focussed on parents using childcare programmes. There is a need to explore what parents view as important for good-quality early education and care in other settings as well - such as kindergartens and playcentres - and the reasons for using their centre. Given the differences that exist in the nature of ownership, philosophy, and organization of such centres, and the similarities in the age-groups served, it is important to explore the differences and similarities in parents' perspectives across different centres.

The main objective of the study was to examine what parents see as important for quality early education and care. This paper reports research findings from a study that was carried out when centre managers and staff, for the first time, were required by government to consult with parents and find out their views as part of the charter development process.(2) The study supported government interest in, and the needs of centres for, more information from the parents' consumer perspective.

Method

Sample

The parent sample was drawn from Otago early childhood centres. Proportional sampling of the three main types of services was used so that the number of each centre selected roughly represented the proportion of each in New Zealand - four kindergartens, three childcare centres and two playcentres. The nine centres were purposively sampled to represent some of the diversity of characteristics in each service (e.g. variations in type of management, number of years of operation, programme philosophy, location and staffing characteristics). A full description of the centres' characteristics is provided elsewhere (Farquhar, 1991).

A total of 211 families participated. The response rate was very high at the playcentres (n = 26, 96.3% families), and modest at the childcare centres and kindergartens (n = 55, 60.4%, and n = 130, 56.4% respectively).

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(2) For details about what a charter is and why many centres, including all the centres in the study, developed a charter see the first research report from the project: Farquhar, S.E. (1991) *Experiences of charter development in early childhood centres in 1990*. Wellington: Ministry of Education.

On the survey questionnaire it was indicated that one or more parents and caregivers could respond. Mainly mother responded (n = 196, 92.9%). All playcentre respondents were mothers. From the kindergartens, seven fathers and three couples responded, and from the childcare centres two fathers and three couples responded. Questionnaires completed by the couples all provided demographic information about the mother, but only two about the father. In these cases the mother was taken to be the respondent because data provided about the father was incomplete.

Instrument

A questionnaire was developed to survey parents. It contained three major sections (3):

* Open-ended questions on reasons for choosing their current early childhood centre, on their experiences, and their involvement in it.
* Questions asking parents, using a four point rating scale of "4" = very important to "1" not important, to rate the importance of a list of goals, and possible criteria of good-quality early childhood centres.(4)
* Demographic and background information on the respondents.

The questionnaire was piloted by three parents known personally to the researcher, reviewed by the project supervisors and the director of the University Nursery School Association, and revised based on the feedback. The questionnaire was ten pages in length and took between 45 minutes to 1 hour to complete. A covering letter was attached to each questionnaire. It explained:

a. the purpose of the survey in the context of the wider study,

b. promised confidentiality of names,

c. mentioned that centres would receive a written summary of the findings, and

d. invited respondents to phone the researcher if they had any queries.

Many parents had prior knowledge that they were likely to be surveyed because the researcher had spoken about this at parents' meetings, committee meetings and in general discussions with staff and parents at centres during negotiations for centre participation in the wider study.

Data collection and analysis

Parents were surveyed during Feb/March 1990 and some additional questionnaires were received during May to July following prompting by the researcher.

The head staff person or nominated person at each centre took responsibility for questionnaire distribution and collection. An envelope was included with each questionnaire. The respondent could use it to place the completed questionnaire in and seal for confidentiality. Parents were asked to return their questionnaire within a three week period. The researcher kept in telephone contact with the head staff person and periodically collected questionnaires as they were received.

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(3) Some additional questions were asked in the survey questionnaire but these are not relevant to detail here for the purpose of this paper.

(4) For details on how the rating items were generated refer to Farquhar (1991) "Quality is in the eye of the beholder".

Response rates at two childcare centres were very low at the end of the three week time-limit. Permission was sought from the managers and head staff members to approach families again by individually posting them a questionnaire with a request to participate. An improved response rate occurred. Approximately three times the number of completed questionnaires were received from the childcare centres through the second approach.

The questionnaire data was analysed using SSPSx on the university VAX computer. Means and standard deviations were obtained for all data. Percentages for the number of responses to demographic questions were calculated. One-way analyses of variance were calculated for parents' mean ratings of the importance of goals and various criteria of a good-quality centre. On goals and quality criteria found to be statistically significant ($p < .05$) the Scheffé procedure was used to identify pairwise contrasts between the different types of centres. The Scheffé test is a conservative one, requiring larger group mean differences than any other multiple comparison method for simple contrasts. It is the most appropriate one when groups have widely differing numbers of cases.

Results

Family, Parent and Child Characteristics

Table 1 shows that there was variation between families in their characteristics at the different types of centres.

Table 1

Respondents' personal and family characteristics

	KINDERGARTEN (130 families)		*CHILDCARE* (55 families)		*PLAYCENTRE* (26 families)		*TOTAL* (211 families)	
Family Structure	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%
Single parent family	21,	16.2	8,	14.5	2,	7.7	31,	15
Two parent family	106,	81.5	45,	81.8	23,	88.5	174,	82
plus relations	2,	1.5	1,	1.8	1,	3.8	4,	2
or live-in nanny	1,	.8	1,	1.8	nil		2,	-
Gross family annual income 1989/90								
under $10,000	5,	3.8	1,	1.8	nil		6,	3
$10,000 - $30,000	49,	37.7	13,	23.6	13,	50.0	75,	36
$31,000 - $50,000	49,	37.7	23,	41.8	6,	23.1	78,	37
over $50,000	9,	6.9	14,	25.5	2,	7.7	25,	12
Did not state	18,	13.8	4,	7.3	5,	19.2	27,	13
Respondent's Highest School Qualifications								
No school qualifications	29,	22.3	4,	7.3	5,	19.2	38,	18
5th Form - School Cert.	32,	24.6	7,	12.7	6,	23.1	45,	21
6th or 7th Form qual.	67,	51.5	44,	80.0	15,	57.7	126,	60
Did not state	2,	1.5	1,	1.8	nil		3,	1
Respondent's Highest Tertiary Qualification								
None	73,	56.2	12,	21.8	14,	53.8	99,	47
Professional eg.nursing	25,	19.2	16,	21.1	4,	15.4	45,	21
Trade eg. hairdressing	18,	13.8	5,	9.1	2,	7.7	25,	12
University degree	8,	6.2	9,	16.4	3,	11.5	20,	10
Post-graduate degree	4,	3.1	12,	21.8	3,	11.5	19,	9
Did not state	2,	1.5	1,	1.8	nil		3,	1
Enrolled Child's Ethnic Group								
Pakeha	109,	83.8	43,	78.2	17,	65.4	169,	80
Maori	2,	1.5	1,	1.8	nil		3,	1
Pacific Islander	2,	1.5	1,	1.8	1,	3.8	4,	2
Other	1,	.8	1,	1.8	2,	7.7	4,	2
Did not state	16,	12.3	9,	16.4	6,	23.1	31,	15
Whether Child has Special Needs								
Yes	9,	6.9	4,	7.4	2,	7.7	15,	7
No	121,	93.1	51,	92.6	24,	92.3	196,	93

The percentages of single and two parent families at kindergarten and childcare are quite similar but playcentre had slightly more two-parent families and fewer single parent families. A trend in the data suggests that parents at childcare centres received a higher income and were better educated at school and tertiary levels, than playcentre and kindergarten. Kindergarten and playcentre parents were quite similar in their education and income. Slightly higher percentages of kindergarten parents had professional or trade qualifications compared to playcentre parents. A slightly higher percentage of playcentre parents than kindergarten parents had at least one university degree.

Most children were pakeha; few were Maori. No Maori children attended either playcentre, but compared to the childcare centres and kindergartens the playcentres had a slightly higher percentage of children from other ethnic groups - Polynesian, American, and Dutch.

The centres had similar percentages of children with special needs. The range of special needs included, hyperactivity, speech delays, hearing problems, asthma, brain damage, food allergies, and a weak muscle problem.

A number of childcare parents who responded to the questionnaire had an infant/toddler enroled (n = 21, 38%, $\bar{X}$ = 12.8 months), and some of these parents (n = 12) also had one and up to two more children enrolled who were aged over two years. Some infants and toddlers also attended the playcentre, however, all of the four respondents who took their infant/toddler to a playcentre stayed with their child because this was playcentre's rule for children under two years of age. All children enroled at the kindergartens were over three years of age.

Parents' reasons for choosing their current early childhood centre

Convenience, such as closeness to home or workplace and hours open, and programme appearance, such as activities that look good and happy children, were the salient reasons for parents' choice of centre. Convenience was important to 53 percent of parents (n = 211), and positive programme impressions were important to 45 percent of parents (n = 95).

Availability, including cost and access to a place, was a key issue for many playcentre parents also (n = 10, 38.5%). A reason why some parents chose kindergarten (n = 15, 11.5%) was because it was recommended to them by people such as plunket nurses and friends or because it had a good reputation as an early childhood service. Fewer parents selected their childcare centre or playcentre on the basis of recommendation or reputation (n = 5, 9%, and n = 1, 3.8% respectively).

Parents' use of their early childhood centre

Parents' needs for child care and access to it, in relation to the type of centre they use, are reflected in the attendance data presented in Table 2.

Table 2

How Long Children Had Been Enrolled and How Often they Attended their Centres.

	KINDERGARTEN (130 families)		*CHILDCARE* (55 families)		*PLAYCENTRE* (26 families)	
Months Enrolled	n	%	n	%	n	%
Under 1 month	28,	21.5	7,	12.7	6,	23.1
1 to 6 months	38,	29.1	12,	21.8	4,	15.2
7 to 12 months	41,	31.6	8,	14.5	5,	19.2
13 to 24 months	21,	16.2	19,	34.5	9,	34.6
over 24 months	1,	.8	7,	12.7	2,	7.7
Did not state	1,	.8	2,	3.6	nil	
Weekly sessions attended						
Up to 3	56,	43.1	10,	18.2	23,	88.4
4 to 5	74,	56.9	12,	21.8	3,	11.5
6 to 10	nil		33,	60.0	nil	

The turnover of children appears to be highest in playcentre and kindergarten, with a greater percentage of children recently enrolled. In contrast, parents had taken their children to childcare for a longer period of time. Childcare parents' also made use of a greater number of sessions per week than playcentre and kindergarten parents.

Parents' activities while child is placed at centre

What do parents tend to do whilst their child is at centre? A large percentage of childcare parents spend most of their time engaged in educational study or work outside of the home (n = 50, 90.9%). Kindergarten parents spend most of their time engaged in home and/or leisure activities (n = 107, 82.3%). Most often playcentre parents stayed at their centre rather than going home or doing other activities (n = 20, 76.9%).

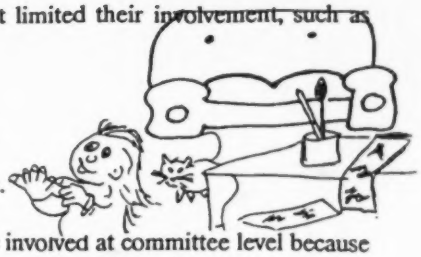
Nature of parent involvement in centre

Parents were asked to indicate through an open question the nature of involvement with their centre. About one quarter of the parents did not state any form of involvement (n = 55, 26%) and the others variously responded:

- helped in the programme (n = 101, 47.9%),
- regularly attended meetings (n = 60, 28.4%),
- provided inputs such as donation of material,
- participated in working-bees or raffle-selling (n = 49, 23.2%),
- attended meetings occasionally (n = 28, 13.3%), and
- acted as a staff member/proprietor (n = 6, 2.8%).

All playcentre parents were involved in some way, but not all childcare or kindergarten parents (n = 21, 38.2%; and n = 34, 26.2% respectively). Playcentre parents mostly helped in the programme (n = 23, 88.5%) and attended parent meetings regularly (n = 22, 84.6%).

Some kindergarten and childcare parents mentioned factors that limited their involvement, such as having:



* recently started at their centre (n = 22),
* younger children at home to care for (n = 10),
* no time to be involved (n = 5), and
* no transport to attend meetings at night (n = 3).

One kindergarten parent mentioned that he had decided not to be involved at committee level because it was female dominated. A childcare parent said that she had discontinued her involvement on the management committee because she felt it was too much work and the committee was not supported enough by the parents.

Goals for early education and care

Table 3 shows the goals, ranked in order of parents' mean importance score, that parents were asked to rate the importance of.

TABLE 3

The Importance of Different Goals for Quality Early Education and Care, Across and Between Parents at Three Types of Early Childhood Centres, and Statistically Significant Differences Among the Three Groups.

Goals	*Total*	*Kindergarten*	*Childcare*	*Playcentre*	*Significance*	
	Mean S.D.	*Mean S.D.*	*Mean S.D.*	*Mean S.D.*	*p*	*Scheffe**
Safe and secure setting	3.90 (0.37)	3.87 (0.42)	3.98 (0.14)	3.85 (0.37)	.11	None
Promote self-confidence	3.88 (0.34)	3.89 (0.32)	3.82 (0.43)	3.96 (0.20)	.20	None
Provide warm loving care	3.81 (0.53)	3.72 (0.64)	3.98 (0.13)	3.86 (0.33)	.01	C > K
Peer relationships	3.79 (0.44)	3.77 (0.00)	3.84 (0.37)	3.81 (0.49)	.63	None
Encourage independence	3.70 (0.57)	3.72 (0.57)	3.62 (0.59)	3.76 (0.52)	.48	None
Language development	3.67 (0.60)	3.68 (0.61)	3.64 (0.59)	3.73 (0.53)	.80	None
Meet children's needs	3.56 (0.61)	3.48 (0.66)	3.71 (0.46)	3.64 (0.57)	.05	None
Motor-skill development	3.54 (0.60)	3.50 (0.64)	3.63 (0.53)	3.52 (0.59)	.41	None
Aesthetic development	3.45 (0.71)	3.43 (0.73)	3.48 (0.60)	3.50 (0.81)	.87	None
Individually appropriate programme	3.43 (0.71)	3.36 (0.77)	3.55 (0.63)	3.56 (0.51)	.17	None
Intellectual development	3.39 (0.69)	3.39 (0.68)	3.44 (0.72)	3.31 (0.74)	.70	None
Partnership with parents	3.29 (0.77)	3.21 (0.80)	3.42 (0.60)	3.46 (0.86)	.11	None
Learn to relate to adults	3.18 (0.80)	3.05 (0.86)	3.46 (0.63)	3.27 (0.67)	.01	C > K
Parent support/friendship	3.12 (0.92)	2.85 (0.91)	3.06 (0.73)	3.32 (0.63)	.03	P > K
Moral development	3.10 (0.95)	3.20 (0.87)	3.04 (0.89)	2.96 (0.85)	.72	None
Promote own culture	2.87 (0.91)	2.73 (0.96)	3.11 (0.79)	3.04 (0.82)	.02	C > K
Keep children entertained	2.64 (0.92)	2.61 (0.94)	2.65 (0.89)	2.77 (0.95)	.72	None
Cultural awareness	2.53 (0.92)	2.42 (0.91)	2.80 (0.93)	2.54 (0.86)	.03	C > K
Parent education	2.49 (0.92)	2.45 (0.94)	2.26 (0.76)	3.19 (0.85)	.00	P > C, K
Teach pre-school skills	2.32 (0.95)	2.40 (0.99)	2.22 (0.84)	2.12 (0.97)	.27	None
Foster compliance with social expectations	2.29 (1.08)	2.45 (1.05)	1.84 (1.03)	2.48 (1.12)	.00	P, K > C
Spiritual development	2.26 (1.02)	2.30 (1.06)	2.15 (0.82)	2.29 (1.17)	.66	None

** K = kindergarten, C = childcare centre, P = playcentre*

Parents' differed widely in their opinion on the importance of some goals, as indicated by the large deviation (of over .9) on the mean importance scores of:

* promoting family culture and cultural values,
* providing support and friendship to parents,
* keeping children entertained,
* promoting children's awareness of other cultures,
* providing parent education,
* teaching pre-school type skills (e.g. to sit quietly, know alphabet),
* fostering compliance with social expectations (e.g. to obey rules), and
* promoting spiritual development (note that this may not necessarily be interpreted as teaching religion).

According to the data the most important goals of any early childhood programme should be to:

* provide a safe and secure environment for children to be in,
* encourage children to develop personal confidence in themselves and their own abilities,
* provide care that is warm and loving,
* encourage children to learn how to get along with one another,
* encourage children's independence (e.g. children are happy to be at the centre without their parents, and they can do things for themselves),
* promote children's development of language and language skills,
* meet children's needs (e.g. for sleep, for play), and
* promote children's development of physical skills.

Goals rated as the least important were:

* providing parent education
* teaching school readiness skills,
* fostering children's compliance with social norms, rules and expectations,
* promoting children's spiritual development.

An inspection of Table 4 below reveals that the three most important goals, according to parents' mean scores, varied in rank order across groups.

TABLE 4

Rank Order of the Top Three Goals According to Parents' Mean Importance Scores Across the Different Centres

Kindergarten	***Childcare***	***Playcentre***
1 child self-confidence	1 safe secure setting	1 child self-confidence
2 safe secure setting	= warm loving care	2 warm loving care
3 peer relationships	3 peer relationships	3 safe secure setting

On seven goals the differences between the mean ratings of two or more groups were found to be statistically significant. On four of these, the significant difference was between kindergarten and childcare parents' mean ratings. Childcare parents placed more emphasis than kindergarten parents on the importance of a programme that:

* provides warm loving care for children,
* encourages children to learn to relate with other adults,
* affirms and encourages children's understanding of their own culture and values, and
* promotes children's awareness of other cultures.

Playcentre parents'mean rating of the importance of providing parents with friendship and support within the early childhood programme is significantly higher than kindergarten parents' mean rating of this.

Playcentre parents' mean importance score for parent education is significantly higher than both childcare and kindergarten parents.

Fostering children's compliance with group norms and rules of behaviour was rated lower in importance by childcare parents than by both kindergarten and playcentre parents. The magnitude of each groups mean rating scores on this criterion suggests that while kindergarten and playcentre parents viewed it as having some importance in an early childhood programme childcare parents did not.

Although not found to be statistically significant, there is a noteworthy difference in the magnitude of childcare and kindergarten parents' mean importance scores on the goal of meeting children's needs. Differences in the magnitude of the mean scores suggests that childcare parents viewed the provision for children's needs to be a more important priority than kindergarten parents did.

The importance of different criteria for assuring good-quality early education and care

Parents were asked to rate the importance of various criteria for good-quality early education and care and the data are presented in Table 5.

Table 5

Parent Ratings of the Importance of Different Quality Criteria at Different Centres and Statistically Significant Differences Among Groups

Quality Criteria	*Total*	*Kindergarten*	*Childcare*	*Playcentre*	*Significance*	
Children's Happiness	*Mean S.D.*	*Mean S.D.*	*Mean S.D.*	*Mean S.D.*	*p*	*Scheffe'*
Responsive staff	3.95 (0.23)	3.95 (0.26)	4.00 (0.00)	3.89 (0.33)	.10	None
Staff care	3.87 (0.34)	3.83 (0.38)	3.95 (0.23)	3.92 (0.27)	.07	None
Pleasant atmosphere	3.79 (0.43)	3.77 (0.44)	3.87 (0.39)	3.69 (0.47)	.17	None
Non-excessive punishment	3.74 (0.64)	3.72 (0.64)	3.82 (0.55)	3.68 (0.80)	.57	None
Settling-in process	3.72 (0.58)	3.65 (0.62)	3.87 (0.47)	3.73 (0.53)	.05	None
Physical needs are met	3.66 (0.57)	3.59 (0.61)	3.82 (0.26)	3.46 (0.65)	.00	C > P, K
Parent contact	3.51 (0.62)	3.49 (0.63)	3.47 (0.67)	3.68 (0.48)	.32	None
Peer group stability	3.17 (0.81)	3.06 (0.84)	3.46 (0.69)	3.12 (0.77)	.01	C > K
Home-visiting	1.89 (0.96)	2.22 (1.00)	1.30 (0.51)	1.28 (0.65)	.00	K > C, P
Safety, Health and Hygiene						
Supervision	3.86 (0.36)	3.84 (0.39)	3.91 (0.29)	3.85 (0.37)	.52	None
Safety of environment	3.83 (0.40)	3.84 (0.39)	3.82 (0.43)	3.85 (0.37)	.94	None
Clean environment	3.80 (0.43)	3.79 (0.43)	3.86 (0.36)	3.73 (0.53)	.42	None
Children's hygiene habits	3.74 (0.49)	3.74 (0.51)	3.76 (0.43)	3.70 (0.53)	.85	None
Model good health/hygiene	3.73 (0.51)	3.76 (0.50)	3.71 (0.50)	3.69 (0.62)	.76	None
Notify about infections	3.54 (0.67)	3.57 (0.66)	3.56 (0.70)	3.40 (0.71)	.54	None
Clear pathways - space	3.30 (0.70)	3.36 (0.68)	3.34 (0.72)	3.15 (0.73)	.30	None
Sick child provisions	3.28 (0.82)	3.25 (0.82)	3.45 (0.67)	3.04 (1.04)	.11	None
Programme						
Developmentally appropriate	3.79 (0.41)	3.79 (0.41)	3.80 (0.40)	3.73 (0.45)	.76	None
Stimulating activities	3.76 (0.46)	3.78 (0.44)	3.76 (0.47)	3.65 (0.56)	.47	None
Sufficient equipment, toys, etc	3.70 (0.48)	3.71 (0.49)	3.73 (0.45)	3.60 (0.50)	.53	None
Balance indoor/outdoor activities	3.68 (0.53)	3.72 (0.50)	3.70 (0.46)	3.42 (0.70)	.03	K > P
Activities for different sized groups	3.63 (0.53)	3.63 (0.54)	3.66 (0.48)	3.50 (0.59)	.46	None
Balance of child/staff activities	3.56 (0.59)	3.55 (0.59)	3.63 (0.56)	3.42 (0.64)	.34	None
Staff play with children	3.53 (0.72)	3.43 (0.78)	3.71 (0.63)	3.65 (0.47)	.04	None
Provisions for special needs	3.52 (0.79)	3.51 (0.89)	3.50 (0.65)	3.61 (0.50)	.85	None
Programme evaluation	3.51 (0.64)	3.56 (0.62)	3.45 (0.61)	3.36 (0.76)	.27	None
Non-sexist practices	3.39 (0.83)	3.33 (0.88)	3.54 (0.69)	3.36 (0.81)	.26	None
Outings and excursions	3.14 (0.84)	3.03 (0.89)	3.43 (0.72)	3.04 (0.72)	.01	C > K
Based on child and family needs	3.11 (0.82)	3.02 (0.87)	3.21 (0.77)	3.33 (0.56)	.13	None
Family values supported	3.10 (0.88)	3.02 (0.92)	3.35 (0.68)	2.96 (0.96)	.05	None
Cultural awareness	3.07 (0.83)	3.06 (0.84)	3.07 (0.82)	3.13 (0.85)	.93	None

Biculturalism promoted	2.71 (0.99)	2.69 (0.98)	2.79 (1.00)	2.72 (1.02)	.81	None
Written schedule	2.54 (1.02)	2.64 (1.06)	2.56 (0.92)	2.00 (0.91)	.02	K > P
Staffing						
Warm and caring people	3.92 (0.29)	3.92 (0.28)	3.96 (0.19)	3.85 (0.46)	.23	None
Team-work	3.85 (0.36)	3.87 (0.34)	3.82 (0.39)	3.81 (0.41)	.54	None
Group size	3.78 (0.43)	3.79 (0.41)	3.85 (0.36)	3.56 (0.58)	.02	K, C > P
Good staff leadership	3.76 (0.49)	3.76 (0.47)	3.76 (0.47)	3.77 (0.65)	.99	None
Staff experienced	3.70 (0.56)	3.74 (0.52)	3.69 (0.51)	3.48 (0.82)	.10	None
Staff meetings for programme planning	3.68 (0.52)	3.73 (0.46)	3.63 (0.56)	3.46 (0.67)	.05	None
Qualified staff	3.59 (0.66)	3.67 (0.64)	3.47 (0.66)	3.40 (0.71)	.06	None
Provisions for staff	3.52 (0.70)	3.61 (0.59)	3.72 (0.50)	2.68 (0.95)	.00	K, C > P
Refresher training	3.44 (0.76)	3.49 (0.73)	3.35 (0.79)	3.40 (0.87)	.51	None
Ratio staff to children	3.40 (0.80)	3.36 (0.82)	3.61 (0.56)	3.19 (0.98)	.05	None
Stability in staffing	3.38 (0.73)	3.38 (0.69)	3.49 (0.67)	3.16 (0.99)	.18	None
Professionalism important	3.33 (0.86)	3.48 (0.74)	3.17 (1.00)	2.92 (0.95)	.00	K > P
Staff are parents	2.37 (1.06)	2.34 (1.06)	2.32 (1.03)	2.66 (1.09)	.34	None
Parent/Family/Community Involvement						
Parents/families welcomed	3.74 (0.50)	3.68 (0.56)	3.86 (0.36)	3.79 (0.42)	.09	None
Parent/staff partnership	3.42 (0.80)	3.38 (0.85)	3.40 (0.80)	3.75 (0.44)	.09	None
Parents participate in decision-making	3.42 (0.73)	3.43 (0.70)	3.30 (0.79)	3.65 (0.69)	.12	None
Parent friendship/support	3.42 (0.75)	3.28 (0.81)	3.63 (0.60)	3.64 (0.57)	.01	C > K
Parents informed about goals, etc	3.41 (0.70)	3.41 (0.70)	3.37 (0.76)	3.46 (0.58)	.86	None
Professional assistance	3.37 (0.34)	3.42 (0.73)	3.31 (0.71)	3.27 (0.83)	.53	None
Community involvement	3.36 (0.77)	3.35 (0.75)	3.00 (0.80)	3.32 (0.69)	.02	K > C
Report about children	3.31 (0.78)	3.26 (0.82)	3.44 (0.69)	3.31 (0.79)	.35	None
Parent education	2.59 (0.98)	2.54 (0.79)	2.59 (0.94)	2.88 (1.12)	.31	None
Provisions for parents	2.18 (1.01)	2.09 (0.99)	2.35 (1.07)	2.23 (0.99)	.26	None

* K = kindergarten, C = childcare, P = playcentre

Parents held wide ranging opinions on the level of importance of five criteria for a good-quality programme as indicated by the standard deviations of the mean scores:

- home visiting,
- a written programme schedule,
- biculturalism,
- staff should be parents themselves, and
- provisions for parents in the centre environment.

On the criterion of home-visiting, kindergarten parents in particular were not in agreement on its importance. This suggests that the practice, which does not occur in childcare and playcentre services, influences parents' views of its importance.

Staff responsiveness to children (e.g. respond quickly and appropriately to children's initiation of interaction) was rated as very important by all childcare parents - the only criterion on which all members of a group agreed. There was also high, but not total, agreement amongst both kindergarten and playcentre parents on this.

In the eyes of the parents' the most important criteria for a good-quality centre were:

- responsive staff,
- staff who show children that they care about them (e.g. affection, step in to prevent bullying),
- good supervision of children,
- safe areas, equipment, toys, and facilities,
- clean areas, equipment, toys, and facilities,
- staff who are warm caring people (i.e. personality), and
- staff who work together and are effective as a team,

Criteria from the categories of programme and parent/family/community involvement are not contained within this list because none have a mean importance score of 3.8 or above. The lower mean importance scores of criteria in these two categories suggests that aspects associated with the other categories (children's happiness, safety and health, and good staffing) tend to be viewed as more important by parents.

Parents' mean importance scores suggest that the least important criteria to assure a good-quality centre are:

* home-visiting,
* promotion of biculturalism,
* a written programme schedule,
* staff parenthood experience,
* parent education (e.g. parenting books, seminars and invited speakers),
* provisions for them in the environment (e.g. magazines, somewhere comfy to sit).

Statistically significant pairwise differences were found on 11 criteria using the Scheffe' procedure. Meeting children's physical needs was more important to childcare parents than to both kindergarten and playcentre parents. Three criteria, taking children on outings and excursions, providing parents with friendship and support, and providing a stable peer-group were rated as more important by childcare parents than by kindergarten parents. The difference between childcare and playcentre parents' mean importance scores on the stable peer group criterion is noteworthy. Although, not a statistically significant difference, it does seem that the criterion is less important to playcentre parents and more important to childcare parents..

The practice of home-visiting was significantly more important for kindergarten parents than both playcentre and childcare parents. Playcentre parents' mean importance score on the criterion of a written programme schedule is lower than childcare parents, and significantly lower than kindergarten parents.

The statistically significant difference between kindergarten and playcentre parents' importance scores on the criterion of a balance of indoor and outdoor activities suggests that kindergarten parents viewed children's access to and provision of both indoor and outdoor play activities as more important than playcentre parents did.

The criteria of group size and provisions for staff in the environment, such as office space and a separate adult bathroom, were significantly more important to kindergarten and childcare parents than playcentre parents.

Kindergarten parents' mean importance score on the criterion of staff professionalism was significantly higher than playcentre parents' mean rating. Community involvement was significantly more important to kindergarten parents and less important to childcare parents.

Discussion

The study has provided some insights into the goals of early education and care programmes that are important for parents at three different types of New Zealand centres. It has examined the similarities and differences in parents' views on what is important for a good-quality early childhood centre. The findings have shown that parents have clear views and preferences, and these, in part, are reflected in their reasons for using the centre they chose.

Among the kindergarten, playcentre and childcare centre parents there were some clear similarities in views. The social-emotional dimensions of early education and care, particularly the nature of staff interactions and caring behaviours, were very important to them. Parents felt it important that their children were in good hands - and, especially for most childcare parents, they believed that their children should be loved by staff. The data echoes the conclusions drawn from research on the parents' perspective in the studies by Swain and Swain (1982) and Podmore and Craig (1991).

Goals of promoting children's self-confidence, encouraging them to relate well with peers, and encouraging independence were most important for parents. Also very important were two goals related to children's and perhaps parents' emotional needs, namely a safe and secure setting for children and warm loving care. This suggests that parents viewed the early childhood centre as being for the primary purpose of fostering children's autonomous behaviour and smoothing their transition from the home to the community, by providing a supportive nurturing environment.

On goals and criteria of good-quality related to linkages and collaboration between home and centre, such as promotion of family/cultural values, parent support and friendship, staff-parent partnership, and provisions for parents in the centre environment parents' mean importance scores tended to be low. Provision of parent education and the importance of parent education in a good-quality centre was considered to be of least importance. The indicate that parents viewed the centre as more of a place for children than for both parents and children.

It is surprising that biculturalism and promotion of cultural awareness were rated so low in importance by parents. Incorporating Maori language, culture, and values into the programme was a topic of discussion in centres at the time this study was carried out, because centres needed to include statements on this in their draft charter. On the other hand, given that the majority of parents were pakeha attending pakeha operated and owned centres the mean importance scores on these two criteria are not surprising.

The early negative stigma and social stereotype of childcare being only for the financially poor and parents in need of social-emotional support (Cook, 1985) does not hold in this study. Childcare parents were on a higher income and were better educated, on average, than kindergarten and playcentre parents. Childcare parents tended to spend the time that their child was at centre, working in a paid position. Parents at the other centres tended to engage in home, leisure, or centre-based activities whilst their child was at centre. Childcare centres catered more for the needs of working parents, while playcentres and kindergartens suited the needs of parents on a lower income because at least one parent, in most families, did not work during the time children attended centre.

A number of statistically significant differences among kindergarten, childcare, and playcentre parents mean importance scores of various goals and criteria for a good-quality centre were identified (e.g. staff professionalism seems to define the quality of the kindergarten service for parents, parent education seems more important for playcentre parents, and staff attention to children's physical needs was a more important quality component of a childcare centre).

To support and recognise parents' needs and values the parents' consumer perspective is an important one to consider in the development of early education and care policy. Study of parents' perspectives can be useful to staff to help them to identify possible mismatches between parents' views and their programme practices. The data, for example, suggest that if staff want to develop the bicultural component in their programme and encourage enthusiastic parent involvement and partnership then they still have some home-work and some convincing to do.

Research that examines in greater depth the relationship between parents' needs and reasons for using their centre and their perspectives on quality is needed. One limitation of the study is that the sample were mainly European. Parents from different cultural groups may well differ in their views on what is important for good-quality early education and care. It would be interesting and useful to examine what goals and views on good-quality are shared by parents from different cultural groups in New Zealand.(5)

(5) Some data on the views of parents' at Te Kohanga Reo centres is provided in a report of the research project from which data for this paper was drawn (Farquhar, 1991).

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